

Opinion: "Black Panther" gives me a personal reason to cheer for a new superhero

By Brandon T. Harden, Philadelphia Inquirer, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.11.18

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Chadwick Boseman in the film "Black Panther." Photo by: Matt Kennedy/Marvel Studios

When I was 6 years old, I thought being a superhero was life. At every free moment, I draped towels across my back to form capes and created masks out of colorful construction paper.

As much as I loved and believed in the fantasy of heroism, I felt inadequate. The heroes, both men and women, that appeared in the movies and on television never looked like me. I didn't believe that stories about people of color could be fantastical — that we could live in different worlds, and fly, and have super strength.

We didn't do stuff like that.

"Black Panther" Redefines The World Of Superheroes

For decades, superheroes like Batman and Wonder Woman have come to symbolize honor, courage, and bravery. In those same decades, blackness has not been part of the picture. African-Americans have been underrepresented not only in Hollywood but in the superhero/sci-fi/fantasy genre. Now, after 17 films since the Marvel Cinematic Universe began, "Black Panther" will redefine and expand the world of superheroes. It does so by placing the fate of the world in the hands of a black man.

The idea of a black superhero is appealing to quite a lot of people. Though the movie doesn't officially hit theaters until February 16, "Black Panther" has already set a record for most advance tickets sold in the Marvel Universe, beating previous titleholder "Captain America: Civil War."

Breaking New Ground In Film

André Carrington teaches African-American literature at Drexel University. "Sadly," he said, "I do think that we [the black community] are excluded from the main stage where the public, including most black people, see superheroes and stories of extraordinary things in general." People hold on to preconceived notions "about what black people are interested in" and how they react to storytelling in films, he said. These old ideas are roadblocks to Carrington. "Those things really keep us from doing the work to get our stories told to bigger audiences," he said.

Although there have been a few black characters in sci-fi or fantasy films, they usually occupy supporting roles. The characters rarely have any background or depth.

Considering all that, I began to resent superhero films. That resentment lasted until I came across the trailer for the Ryan Coogler-directed "Black Panther."

The Story Of The "Black Panther"

In "Black Panther," T'Challa, played by Chadwick Boseman, returns home to the fictional African nation of Wakanda to take his rightful place as king. Upon arriving, he finds his throne and honor in jeopardy. T'challa must use all of his powers as Black Panther, the leader of the panther tribe, to defeat longtime enemy, played by Michael B. Jordan. In doing so, he preserves the kingdom and the safety of the world.

Finally, a story of a black hero with African roots is being told. While "Black Panther" is not the only superhero that is part of the current cultural conversation, "Black Panther" feels bigger. It's part of the Marvel Universe, the comic book company and movie making studio that has generated billions of dollars.

The first look at the heart-pumping “Black Panther” trailer instantly went viral. Not only do we see a superhero from the black perspective, audiences get to watch an all-star black cast.

Philadelphia-based critic and filmmaker Shantrelle P. Lewis is very excited for the film's release. “What's not to love about an all-black universe where black people are not only royalty but superheroes?” she said. The movie will show black people “in a way that we haven't necessarily been depicted before,” she added.

Black Films Have Done Well At Theaters

It’s also worth mentioning the power of black consumers. Hollywood is known for its struggle with diversity. The majority of the movies produced in Hollywood are made by and are about a small majority of people, typically white people. Nonetheless, black films have recently and consistently outperformed expectations for movie sales. Movies like “Girls Trip,” “Hidden Figures,” “Get Out,” “The Best Man Holiday” and “Moonlight” prove the myth wrong that black stories aren’t sought after by large audiences.

“Black Panther” is the type of film that’s desperately needed in today's society. People are starting to have harder conversations about race relations. The movie has already started to go beyond the screen, sparking discussion around the power and genius of blackness. The idea of an advanced civilization where black people thrive in the absence of whiteness, in and of itself, is a bold and provocative idea.

“Black Panther,” bridges traditional African tribal culture to a modern, technologically advanced world. It belongs in the genre of Afrofuturism, a cultural movement that has brought blackness into the spaces of sci-fi and fantasy, which have long excluded black people. “Black Panther” furthers that mission.

Film Opens During Black History Month

Traditionally, Black History Month has been a time of appreciation and reflection of African-American culture. Every year we show respect and appreciation for courageous figures who made it possible for the successful and influential black figures we know today. These are people like Barack Obama, Oprah and Beyoncé. This year, Black Panther allows us to peer into the future. It lets us look at the possibility of what blackness can become.

“Black Panther” sends a message that blackness can and should be portrayed for what it is: beautiful, complex, and dense.

We can do stuff like this.